

# **APPENDIX 50**



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## Group launches Va.'s first oyster co-op

October 13, 2010 | By Cory Nealon, cnealon@dailypress.com | 247-4760

Watermen, scientists and businessmen have collaborated to launch Virginia's first privately funded oyster cooperative.

Oyster Company of Virginia, founded in August by Northern Neck businessman W. Tolar Nolley, will equip a dozen watermen with the resources needed to farm oysters in the Chesapeake Bay.

The cooperative will lease acres of bay bottom from the state, and buy oyster seed and cages to grow oysters in. Salaried watermen will plant the seeds, then harvest and sell the mature oysters.

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Profits will pay the watermen's salary, fund the purchase of new equipment, and expand the program, said Ken Smith, president of the Virginia State Waterman's Association.

"I've never seen 12 people so excited in my life," said Smith, chief operating officer of the cooperative, which will officially unveil its plans Thursday at The Watermen's Museum in Yorktown.

Chesapeake oysters have been plagued for decades by disease, loss of habitat and pollution. They are at less than 1 percent of their peak historic population. Many watermen have resisted calls to abandon the centuries-old hunter-gatherer approach in favor of oyster farming, also known as aquaculture.

The industry has made numerous advances in the last decade, most notably developing more disease-tolerant oyster seeds, that have made aquaculture a more viable option. That, combined with the endorsement of Smith and others trusted by watermen, led to the cooperative's formation.

It hopes to recruit more watermen in the coming years and attract corporate support by promoting the program as a way to reduce bay pollution, Smith said. Oysters, which filter up to 50 gallons of water per day, help rid the bay of excess nutrients that cause dead zones and other problems.

"The oyster has a positive effect cleaning up the bay," Smith said.

The cooperative plans to lobby state and federal officials to include their efforts in the "pollution diet" the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is drafting for the bay.

The effort is similar to one introduced two years ago by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission. It used part of the \$15 million it received to revive the Chesapeake's blue crab population to train dozens of watermen to farm oysters.

In addition to oyster farming, Oyster Company of Virginia has partnered with Reeftek Inc., a reef-building company run by Middle Peninsula businessman Robert Jensen. The cooperative will work with Reeftek to create oyster sanctuaries, Smith said.

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